

Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany
The Transfiguration
Mark 9: 2 – 9; 2 Kings 2:1-12

Orthodox Jewish families have a beautiful custom. At the Passover Seder meal, an extra place is set at the family table and it is left unoccupied. The place is for Elijah. Elijah is the prophet who didn't die, but whom God took up in a whirlwind of fire. He is expected to return to announce the Day of the Lord which may be at any time; so there is always a place ready for him at the sacred family meal.

I am struck by the way that the lessons for today speak to each other. In the first lesson, Elijah is about to be taken up in a whirlwind. He and his faithful servant, Elisha go from Gilgal to Bethel, and from Bethel to Jericho and from Jericho to the river Jordan. At each move, Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind, and each time Elisha refuses and says "As the Lord lives and you yourself live, I will not leave you!" At each stop, Elijah and Elisha are met by local prophets who ask Elisha if he knows that this day his master will be taken away. Each time, Elisha says, "Yes, I know, but don't say anything."

At last they reach the Jordan, cross it by a miracle, and as Elijah is about to be taken away, because of his faithfulness, Elisha is granted a favor, that he receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit; and as Elijah disappears, his mantle – a symbolic shawl – a symbol of Elijah's spiritual power falls on Elisha. That was our sequence hymn: "God of the prophets, bless the prophets' heirs: Elijah's mantle on Elisha spread ..."

I have always been just a little bit squeamish about that word “discipleship.” It strikes me as “church talk” – the specialized Christian language that reminds us and others of the revival-tent and tends to put off the very people we are trying to reach with the gospel. That, or we fall into the habit of believing that if we use the word, we have explained the idea. But try as I might to find equivalent words, nothing captures the full sense of the word that means, follower, learner from a master teacher, servant, witness, worker in the cause. Exhaust the dictionary and we are left with “discipleship.”